

Capitol journalist fulfilled dreams after retirement

William "Bo" Byers, 1920-2010

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William "Bo" Byers, who asked a generation of politicians tough questions as one of the Texas Capitol's most respected journalists, died Sunday in Austin. He was 90.

Byers, who had his first story published in the American-Statesman when he was 12 years old, chronicled everything from scandal in the Texas Veterans Land Board to corruption in South Texas to President John F. Kennedy's assassination during a journalism career that spanned several decades.

Retirement in 1983, after 10 years with the Associated Press and another 27 with the Houston Chronicle's Austin bureau, did little to slow Byers down. He returned to his alma mater, the University of Texas, to earn a master's degree in journalism at the age of 73. And he was in his 80s when he fulfilled his lifelong dream of becoming a singer at Central Presbyterian Church, taking singing lessons until he was ready to join the choir. Byers sang his last solo about a month ago when he turned 90.

"What I remember about him the most is that he had a model for living, and it was to live your life to the fullest and follow your dreams," said his daughter Mary Herrick, one of six children. "Nothing kept him from living his life."

Byers, a native of Miami, Mo., came to Austin when he was 6, sent to live with his aunt and uncle after his father died of pneumonia. After graduating from UT, he enlisted in the Army Air Corps, where he served as a B-17 navigator in the 351st Bomb Group, flying 30 missions in Europe during World War II.

After returning from war, Byers went to work for the Associated Press and then the Houston Chronicle. As a reporter on Kennedy's press bus during his Dallas trip in 1963, Byers heard the gunshots that felled the president and filed frantic dispatches from pay phones.

In Austin, Byers developed a reputation as a tenacious journalist, covering the Texas veterans scandal that resulted in the conviction of Land Commissioner Bascom Giles and the Sharpstown stock fraud scandal in 1971.

"He was not only a competitive (reporter) but very well-liked by his competitors," said Sam Kinch Jr., a former Dallas Morning News editor and reporter. "He was gregarious. We wanted to know about everyone he met."

Byers also had a profound effect on younger members of the Capitol press corps. Former Statesman political columnist Dave McNeely was a beginning reporter when he worked in Byers' Chronicle bureau in the 1960s and called Byers his own graduate school of journalism. "He was a great and patient and wise teacher," McNeely said.

Byers was married for 64 years to Mary Catherine Cowan, who died in 2006.

Visitation will be held from 6 to 8 p.m. June 1 at Weed-Corley-Fish Funeral Home. Services are scheduled for 10:30 a.m. June 2 at Central Presbyterian Church, 200 E. Eighth St. Burial will be at the Texas State Cemetery.